



## The Mall

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### Repressed

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## REPRESSED

*Malayna Pottschmidt*

Attempting to appreciate the beauty of the Sistine Chapel through a straw. One eye, one straw. You make out a curved line that most likely is the butt crack of an old Biblical man facing the Last Judgment. Straining to see over the tallest man's shoulders at your favorite artist's concert, then taking two steps either side and noticing that *everyone* is as tall as he is. You strain yourself, get on your tippy toes, and see the black handle of the microphone covered in specks of spit. A photo that you knew would just look absolutely BEAUTIFUL, just to have someone knock into you so it turns out like an unidentifiable smear.

Or, my childhood.

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He grabs an almost archaic contraption and bounds up the stairs to my room.

"Layniebug! Remember that leaf presser Mamaw got you? It's a beautiful day to use it," he explains, eyes glazed over. It's six in the evening, prime time for a Bud Light, or eight. I didn't know it then, though.

He hadn't really done anything fun with me for a while, so I peer at him inquisitively. I am bored, and I feel like getting some fresh air. Plus, I love nature, so I hop out of bed. Click, I turn off the tiny silver TV I had. As I walk by, static caresses what little arm hair I have. He's already outside, searching for the perfect leaf to press flat and dry out like a business man's favorite dress shirt, splattered with his newborn's pumpkin and squash concoction from the day before.

He coaches me through the process. "Go look around, Layniebug! There are leaves all over the place. Just pick one that really stands out to you. We'll make a masterpiece."

It's the middle of June and the sun is beating on my auburn hair. I put my hand to my head and wonder if I could make a heated blanket out of the strands. Glancing at my father, I see a spear of fifty hairs plastered against his forehead. They're the color of Ken Doll's hair at most times, but the sweat darkens it and now he looks more like Jeffrey Dahmer. His thin, chapped lips grip a half-finished cigarette. I hate the smell of cigarette smoke, so I cover my nose with my hands dramatically. He notices, but continues to blacken his lungs. A perspired mixture of salt and beer drips down his moon-like cheek; little craters fill up and get drunk.

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Dinnertime is always hideously loud and rage filled. The six of us don't sit together at a big table, circling each other and singing "Kumbaya", or whatever the hell it is families do when eating a meal. Last week, Dad made spaghetti. Then, he made spaghetti art. The snow colored wall in my living room was his blank canvas and a plate of spaghetti was his medium of choice. I've never seen someone so ridiculously angry, or maybe so ridiculously piss drunk, to the point where they hurl a heavy china plate against the wall above where they sleep. He covered his couch in spaghetti sauce, cow crumbles, noodles, and shards of the plate. My mother scrubbed, and still scrubs that spot on the wall. We don't have the heart to tell her it's stained for good, tinted with a little pink now. She probably knows. I like the abnormality on the bleached drywall. It's a memorial for the not-eaten spaghetti. After all, we were always told to clean off our plates. *What a waste of delicious pasta*, I think to myself.

In two months, on Thanksgiving, Dad will take the turkey out of the oven, set it out on the counter, and then yell at my mom for some miniscule reason. An argument will ensue, and soon enough, they start cooking like the turkey. Dad's timer will go off: *DING DING DING*. His alarm is much scarier than the one on the oven: two gigantic, bloodshot eyes, with huge black circles in the middle. You'll see humanity escape him, drained out by a demon or two. With two sweaty palms, he'll attempt to seize the two silver handles of the turkey pan. He'll slip, partially from the dampness encompassing his fingers and partially from the alcohol flooding his soul. The Devil will help him out, though, reasserting his posture. Hovering over him, like a shadow, Lucifer will get closer and direct Dad. He's more pliable after a beer, or two, or six. The Devil/Dad hybrid will then stomp menacingly towards the back door, realize his hands are full, and shove his shoulder blade against the black door handle. It will take him two full shoves to get the door open enough for him to fit through with the bird. Six steps to the grass, he won't even pay attention to how slippery the deck is. Devils don't worry about that sort of thing, I assume. An unadulterated snowfall will glisten beautifully until Dad hurls the pan at it. The darkened poultry in the blizzard resembles Snow White's visage, plagued with a boil. Devils don't like beauty, and they certainly aren't fond of Thanksgiving.

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"Get up, get up! Rise and shine! Smell the coffee!" He waits six seconds, then busts through the door. "I told you guys we have a special adventure today! Get some clothes on. It's cold. Sweatpants, sweatshirt, who cares about your hair. You have twenty minutes." He shuts the door a little harder than he intended to, but the slam awakes us more than his attempt at rallying us up.

My sister looks over at me, yawns, and rolls her eyes. I do the same. It's a Sunday morning in early March, somewhere stuck in winter but inching toward spring. We both know we are in over our heads. We rarely do anything fun when we are at our dad's apartment, but when my dad decides he wants to do something entertaining, it's definitely not our version of entertainment. I get out of my bed first. The sheets are covered in polka dots that are varied shades of blue. Mariah, my sister, has identical sheets, but her polka dots are pink. Heading for the shower, I hear Mariah's bed quickly creak.

"I need to take a shower," she claims.

"Okay... same. That's why I'm about to get in right now," gesturing to my towel covered body, I lean into the shower to turn the faucet.

"I really should be able to take one first since I'm older, but whatever. Hurry up."

"Well you should have gotten up when you had the chance. Just cuz you're older doesn't mean you get whatever you want. Plus, you took a shower last night. You don't need to take another one for whatever 'adventure' Dad is taking us on." I have always been impeccable at the art of persuasion.

While I'm in the bathroom, attempting to wipe the foggy, condensation-covered mirror off with a hand towel, my dad cracks the bedroom door open. Mariah is sitting on her pink polka dots, wrapping a zebra patterned fleece sweatband around her head.

"Three minutes and we are out of here!" He pauses. "Well, I guess you can eat some cereal first. In three minutes I wanna see you out here eating Cap'n Crunch!"

Rolling my eyes at my reflection, I prop the door open. Cold air rushes against my arms, feet, and face. Goosebumps appear, so I re-wrap the towel to cover my arms. Mariah decided she didn't need another shower, so she's sitting on her bed fully dressed in sweatpants and a sweatshirt with old boots. I dry off and in the blink of an eye, I look the same as her. My headband is cheetah print, though, and MUCH cuter. We walk out of the door and somehow, an hour later, end up in the middle of a park where Native Americans once lived. We're here to search and sift through dirt for arrowheads.

"Dad, really? On Sunday, our day of *rest*, you're making us do hard labor?" I protest.

"Listen, it's only for a couple of hours. Just humor me. I promise you'll have fun and ask me to bring you back here in two weeks."

Mariah and I peek at each other, giving two eye rolls with enough attitude filled-energy to flip the world upside down. There are seven other people in our group; all here to sift through dirt in hopes of finding buried treasure. An overly enthusiastic guide takes us through the history of the park, tells us the rules, and shows us how to sift through our designated dirt piles. She gets very loud when she tells us that if we do find anything of worth, the park gets to keep it. My dad looks a little bummed, but quickly shakes off any negative energy for the moment. He's in his element. We all put thick gloves on because who knows what's in that dirt. Huge plastic bags of dirt are placed by each of our stations. We all have our own sifting box, which is the size of the bottom of a small dog cage. Tiny squares are cut out of the bottom metal to let the dirt fall through and the large pieces to emerge.

I sift for an hour and forty-six minutes. I sift through the dirt that the Delaware and Miami Native American tribes built their lives on. I sift through the dirt that the white men marched onto to order the Natives to vacate their homes. I sift through the dirt that tired daughters have sifted through before, dragged along unwillingly. I sift and find nothing but more dirt, bigger clumps of ugly dirt. For a moment, I wish I wouldn't have come at all.

The three of us walk on the pebbled trail, winding through the foliage and the fields of wheat. My dad turns and analyzes a white flower on the ground. As he is crouching, giving this tiny organism his full attention and wonder, his hair gleams as golden and pure as the wheat to the right of him. He looks genuinely happy, clean, and pure. Even though a cold, brisk air chills my body, the sunshine warms my soul. I'm glad I came.

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Someone is banging on my front door, ringing the doorbell frantically. My mom sprints to the window, throws the blinds open, drops her jaw, and heaves the door agape. My sister barrels through the entryway, tears pouring out of her eyes. Snot is running out of her nose. She spits as she screams at the horror she just faced. No one can understand her, but after two minutes, we know what happened. She's in middle school; seventh grade basketball practice ends and my dad is there to pick her up in his blue 1997 Ford Expedition. His eyes are glazed over and he slurs his words.

"Heeeeyyy, hunny. Howwaz practice? Make a lot of," he gestures as though he's shooting a basketball, "hoops?"

Mataya stays silent for most of the ride home, only four minutes of drunken babbling to deal with. They're on the street closest to our neighborhood. There are no streetlights and the speed limit is thirty-five miles an hour. My dad, in his drunken stupor, analyzes the speed limit as twice the posted number. He's pushing seventy, and Mataya tells him to slow down. They're about to turn into the neighborhood. His brain slowly recognizes that the turn is quickly approaching as he tries to stop and turn simultaneously.

*SLAM! CRACK! CRASH! BAM! WHACK! BOOM!*

He crashes forcefully into our neighborhood sign. The stone breaks into a billion pieces, injured pebbles sprawled against the pavement. The light post that once illuminated the bright red letters on the sign lay in the middle of the road, split in half. The shards of glass gleam innocently against the night sky. The two sit in awe for one minute. They're alive- or are they dead? Surely this can't be Heaven. Mataya, horrified, looks at Dad like he's some grotesque, possessed demon. She opens the door, caved inwards, but still working. She sprints home despite the pain, adrenaline rushing through her veins. *Who was that demon? Why did he want my dad?*

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I twist the red knobs on my leaf presser: one, two, three, four. Lifting up the wooden top that is painted with fairies and flowers, I await what masterpiece I created. I remove the two sheets of white paper and the cardboard piece that cover my Sugar Maple leaf.

I was supposed to wait for at least two weeks, but I only waited for one. I just want to peek, which is why I am alone in this secret mission. When I see the leaf, my heart breaks. It looks greyer and frailer. It was once beautiful, vibrant, lush, and I killed it. *Why did my dad do this?* The leaf is much smaller now than it once was. I try to pick it up; I try to comfort it. The top crumbled off. It wasn't my idea though. Dad told me to. I was just a pawn in his game of destruction. I'm an accomplice, nonetheless. I am disgusted and ashamed.

Twisting the knobs back on, I throw the leaf press into the back of a cabinet. I hope no one will ever find it, especially not my dad. Especially not me. I run back inside. One day, it will be covered in cobwebs. One day, I will forget it ever existed. The leaf will still be there, disintegrating over decades, wondering why I let it die. Wondering why I let it be forgotten.